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ABSTRACT

This report describes a school district that has managed to use state mandated standards, accountability, and interventions to nearly eliminate the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students and to do so without sacrificing students on the altar of test scores. Frenship Independent School District, Texas, serves approximately 5,300 students from 2 counties in 1 high school, 1 alternative high school, 1 junior high school, 1 intermediate school, 4 elementary schools, and 1 disciplinary alternative elementary education program. The demographic breakdown shows that the population is approximately 24% Hispanic, 4% African American, and 72% Anglo. A look at the reasons for the success of this school district, using data from multiple sources, reveals eight characteristics contributing to the district's success: (1) leadership; (2) shared decision making; (3) commitment to professional development; (4) emphasis on family involvement; (5) alignment of curriculum and instruction; (6) integrated technology; (7) accountability; and (8) early interventions and alternative schooling. This school district has accepted that change and improvement are ongoing. They have found what is best for their students, and they are doing it. (SLD)

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Special Report
on
Standards, Assessment, Accountability, and Interventions
for the
Edna McConnell Clark Foundation
Report #5 Winter 2001

The District That Does What's Best for Kids: Frenship ISD

Patricia Cloud Duttweiler
and Marilyn Madden

Introduction

This final special report is about a school district that has managed to use state mandated standards, assessment, accountability, and interventions to virtually eliminate the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students and do so without sacrificing students on the altar of test scores. Our visit to this district came as a revelation.

In the past, staff members from the National Dropout Prevention Center have visited numerous districts where administrators were unwilling to make the changes necessary to improve student learning. We have seen schools where teachers believed their opinions counted for next to nothing, where there was a palpable adversarial tension between teachers and administrators, and where teachers were isolated in their own classrooms teaching an ill-defined curriculum. We have been in classrooms where computers were stacked one on top of the other in a corner because teachers had not been trained to use them. We have visited schools where discipline was fragmented and students' behavior was disruptive, and where parents were not welcomed, let alone considered partners in their children's education. But most discouraging of all, we have listened to teachers and school administrators use race, poverty, or family background as excuses for the failure of some groups of students to achieve. Many of you who are reading this have also visited such schools and know how frustrating it is. Many of you may wonder, as we have, how can we convince such schools that there is a better way?

We were fortunate to have the opportunity provided by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to visit a district where change is not something to be feared, but is embraced in the pursuit of excellence. The district's leadership sets high expectations and provides the support to achieve them. In

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each of the eight schools we visited, expectations are high for every student, and teachers do whatever it takes to help struggling students. The curriculum is aligned across all schools in the district both horizontally within grades and vertically between grades. Computer technology is integrated into the curriculum, and teachers are trained to teach using a variety of software. In every school, character education and discipline go hand in hand, and parents are actively encouraged to participate in their children's education. In every school we visited, teachers had input into decisions, and we observed a climate of trust and collaboration throughout the district. In a very real sense, what we found was a community focused on learning.

Why We Visited Frenship Independent School District

Sprawling across 130 square miles of the flat and windy South Plains of Texas, Frenship Independent School District (ISD) thrives amid windmills, cotton fields, mesquite trees, and new subdivisions. The district includes approximately 5,300 students from parts of Hockley and Lubbock Counties. There is one high school (grades nine through twelve), an alternative high school (grades nine through twelve), a junior high school (grades seven and eight), an intermediate school (grades five and six), four elementary schools (grades pre-K through four), and a disciplinary alternative education program (grades one through twelve). With nearly 28% of the student population classified as economically disadvantaged, the demographic breakdown includes approximately 24% Hispanic, 4% African-American, and 72% Anglo.

We visited Frenship ISD to find out what they had done during the past four years to account for the virtual disappearance of the gap in achievement between Hispanic and Anglo students and economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers on the state's standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). With the latest administration of the TAAS in the spring of 2000, Frenship ISD received a state rating of Exemplary, two steps above the Academically Acceptable rating it was given just four years ago in 1996. During those four years, the district raised the average TAAS scores of its economically disadvantaged students to above 90% in reading, mathematics, and writing. While the district's Anglo students have historically done well on the TAAS tests, in 1996 Hispanic students scored an average of only 76.3% on the TAAS reading test, 76.8% on the writing test, and 72.5% on the mathematics test. By 2000, however, the Hispanic students scored an average of 90.3% on the TAAS reading test, 91.2% on the writing test, and 94.4% on the mathematics test.

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We visited every school in the district. We talked to the superintendent and administrators at the district office. We talked with principals, teachers, counselors, and students in all the schools. And, we talked with the school board members, teachers, parents, and community leaders that make up the District Improvement Council. The path taken by Frenship ISD may not be the one some districts would choose, but the fact remains that for Frenship this path led the way to academic success for all its students. What we found was exciting, inspiring, and a vindication of what we have believed for years: a district administration that is open to change and improvement, that seeks input from teachers and parents, that establishes a climate of high expectations, and that provides the support to both teachers and students so those expectations can be met and can ensure that all students achieve high standards.

Eight Characteristics Contributing to Frenship ISD's Success

In trying to define the components that contributed to Frenship ISD's achievement, we know we will miss mentioning many of the intangibles that create a climate of success. The competence and caring of the teachers and administrators throughout the district comes to mind as one of the attributes that is hard to fit into a specific category. The overall enthusiasm and willingness to do what needs to be done is another. We were able, however, to isolate eight characteristics that permeated the district, that were mentioned by nearly everyone we talked to, and that were evident in the daily operation of the schools. The eight characteristics are leadership, shared decisionmaking, commitment to professional development, emphasis on family involvement, the alignment of curriculum and instruction, integrated technology, accountability, and early interventions and alternative schooling.

Leadership

Expectations Begin at the Top. It is impossible to separate the elements of leadership and high expectations in Frenship ISD. It was pointed out time and time again, by every group we talked to, that expectations begin at the top and filter down, beginning with the school board and the superintendent. This is a district that faces its challenges, has the willingness to change, and searches for what works with students.

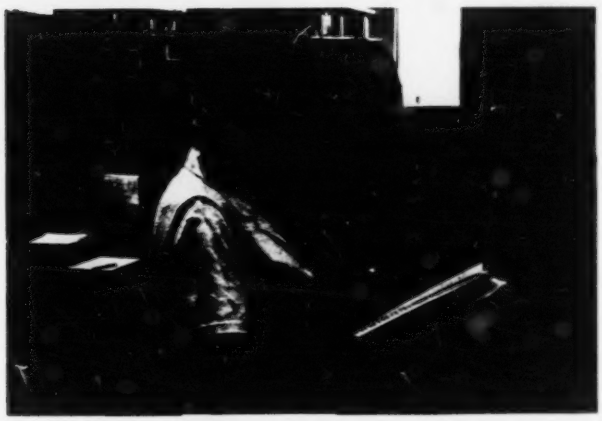
The district set a goal two years ago to become an exemplary district, set its expectations, and met them. Dr. Paul Whitton (pictured below with a business partner) who was superintendent of Frenship ISD when we visited, retired as of February 1, 2001 to accept the position of Executive Director of the Texas Association of School Administrators. When talking to us during our visit, he emphasized that, "Every decision we make is based on the needs of the students. This focus is clearly communicated to administrators, teachers, parents, and students; everyone in the district recognizes the fact

that all students are expected to achieve." Most importantly, high expectations are coupled with administrator support.

Open Communication. As one teacher said, "Communication is open, honest, and expectations are thoroughly communicated. The teachers we talked to emphasized that there has always been openness in the district and a willingness to investigate possibilities. We saw no evidence of the adversarial relationship between teachers and administrators that is found in many districts. For example, in two of the schools we visited the principals took over a teacher's classroom so the teacher could talk with us. In every school, teachers and students were available to answer our questions. Decisions are made considering "what's best for children." One high school teacher commented, "I've worked in a lot of places, and I wouldn't want to work anywhere else." An intermediate school teacher said, "As a parent, I am thrilled to have my children go to school in this district."

Personnel Processes. Leadership plays an important role in the selection of teachers to fill the district's classrooms. The district has a specific philosophy and uses its personnel process to select teachers with the appropriate attitudes and skills. The personnel process begins with a review of the applicants' credentials by the Director of Human Resources. Approved applicants are then given a teacher perceiver interview. Applicants then are interviewed by the Assistant Superintendent and the Directors of Elementary and/or Secondary Education. Applicants who pass these hurdles are interviewed by the school principal and, finally, a site-based committee of teachers screen applicants at the school level. Although the district pays only the state base salary (less than nearby Lubbock ISD, for example), it still has an abundance of applicants. The superintendent said, "We employ the very best people we can find and let them do their jobs."

School Board's Role. The Frenship School Board (Board of Trustees) is particularly supportive. It has seven members, elected every three years to staggered terms; one member has been on the board nine years, another six years. The district's strategic plan is updated every year with the assistance of the District Improvement Council. There is a partnership in the district between the school board, administration, principals, teachers, and parents. Administrators praise school board members for their unfailing support. The school board has been nominated as School Board of the Year in Texas.



Shared Decision Making

Site-Based Management. There have been both district-level and school-level planning and decision-making committees in the district for nearly ten years. While this should now be true of all schools and districts in Texas, Frenship was ahead of the curve. The Texas state legislature mandated in 1995 that schools and districts adopt site-based decision-making. Senate Bill 1 directed school dis-

trict boards of trustees to adopt policies to establish district- and campus-level planning and decision-making processes that involve the professional staff of the district, parents, business representatives, and community members in establishing and reviewing the district's and campuses' educational plans, goals, performance objectives, and major classroom instructional programs. Meetings are supposed to be held regularly by district- and campus-level committees, and the board, or the board's designee, is directed to periodically meet with the district-level committee to review the district-level committee's deliberations.

At the high school, the site-based committee, which meets every week, includes teachers from each department, counselors, parents, and community members. The committee helps develop the campus plan—budget, scheduling, and staff development—all based on student needs. The committee is a sounding board for the principal's decisions, but, as the principal pointed out, "it would not be smart of me to ignore the committee's recommendations." The committee bases its recommendations on research, investigations, and /or visits to other sites. For example, the decision to adopt block scheduling took months to put in place; the whole process took about one and one-half years to implement.

At the intermediate school, the site-based management team is scheduled to meet every other week. This is not strictly adhered to, however, since the principal meets with grade-level committees whenever there are problems. The teachers at the intermediate school described an open-door policy both at the school and at the district office where administrators treat teachers as professionals and listen to what they say. Throughout the district, teachers say they feel a part of the school community and believe they have a strong voice in their schools and the district. In every school, teachers have input into how the budget is spent and on personnel issues. Teachers serve on district committees to select curriculum. Teachers indicated to us they feel they can share information about students, saying the district administration "is pretty hands-on with kids." Teachers say administrators, "trust teachers to know what works and what doesn't." One teacher said, "Overall, everyone is trying to do what is best for each student."

Commitment to Professional Development

The district provides excellent support for professional development for both teachers and administrators. For the most part, professional development is focused at the campus level. Site-based committees identify the schools' needs and plan the activities, generally in the area of curriculum and instruction. For weak teachers, there is help from other teachers, targeted staff development, and, in addition, the district may require them to take additional college courses. Teacher turnover, however, is weeding out old methods of teaching and providing an infusion of new teachers and new methods. There is more hands-on learning, more student input, more project class work, and more technology used as part of the curriculum.

When asked, district administrators said they were not pleased by the quality of teachers being processed through higher education—especially new graduates' lack of computer skills. Across the district, there is a concentrated effort on technology training. In addition to two staff development days at the beginning of year, the district sponsors Techno Tuesdays—every two or three weeks for one hour after school—during which the curriculum technologists (C-Techs) offer training on specific software. At Bennett Intermediate School on WWWednesdays,

the C-Techs provide training in the school computer labs for teacher teams during their conference/teaming periods. All teachers must be proficient on computers and are assessed on their level of technology skills. Ongoing training on computers and software applications like Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint are provided by the district.

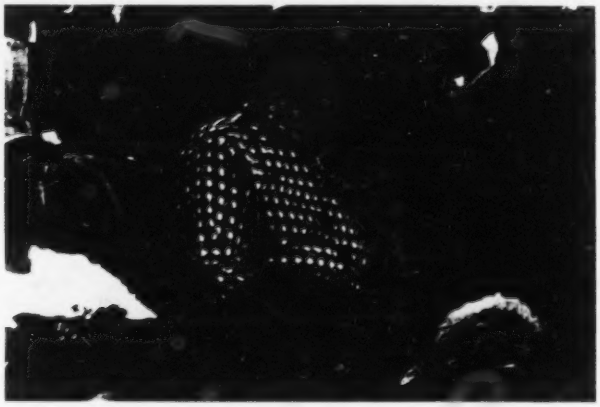
Conferences, workshops, and visits to other districts are also part of the districts' professional development plan. Members of site-based committees go to Austin for a yearly conference. Mathematics teachers attend a conference in Houston, and Advanced Placement English and mathematics teachers attend a week-long conference at Texas Tech University in Lubbock where they learn new skills and knowledge. In September 2000, the district held a *Character Counts*! conference for over 700 participants. A huge Technology Conference was held at Frenship High School just before our visit at the end of October 2000. The district hosted over 2000 participants. Alan November (right) was the featured speaker, and over 75 teachers from the district presented workshops.

When talking to Paul Banks, principal at Bennett Intermediate School, we found an example of professional development at its best. We noticed a copy of William Glasser's book, *The Quality School Teacher*, on top of a filing cabinet in Mr. Banks' office, and Mr. Banks said he gave each teacher a copy of the book. He goes to the different team meetings and discusses parts of the book with the teachers and how they can apply the concepts to their teaching. This is the kind of ongoing, directed, and personal professional development that can make a significant improvement in classroom teaching.

Emphasis on Family Involvement

Family involvement is welcomed, encouraged, and nurtured in Frenship ISD schools. Family involvement is always a two-way street, but the foundation for it is based on effective communication. The school must reach out to families, and families must take time to get involved with the school.

Frenship ISD provides several programs that reach out to the diverse populations the schools serve. Read With Your Student Nights, TIPS program (Targeting Involvement of Parents and Students), Donuts for Dads and Muffins for Moms, Family Technology Night, and family involvement annual conferences are just some of the projects designed to entice parents into the schools. Parents participate in developing the district's strategic plan, serve on the District Improvement Council, work on school committees, and participate in the special programs mentioned above, which are especially designed to involve parents with their children's learning. School administrators throughout the district say they have seen family participation increase over the last two years.



Communication between teachers and parents is essential, and the elementary schools, the intermediate school, and the junior high school all send folders with work and notification of progress home every week. A pilot program where phones have been put in teachers' classrooms in some elementary schools enables teachers to immediately call parents at home or at work with positive messages about their children. Several schools hold achievement award assemblies every six weeks. Family members and students have an opportunity to share in the excitement of celebrating learning achievements.

Parents help Frenship by understanding and accepting rules, volunteering, planning and conducting fundraising efforts, and participating on several standing committees. The elementary schools in the Frenship ISD help families by providing the *Character Counts*! program that builds character and discipline. Discipline in the elementary schools is handled by providing a character card to each student. These cards go home with the student so family members are aware of infractions and are always aware of any behavioral problems that may be occurring. The TIPS program (Targeting Involvement of Parents and Students) provides an opportunity for teachers to meet with families to discuss students' progress. The district plans three days of early dismissal for the students after the first six weeks of school for parent conferences.

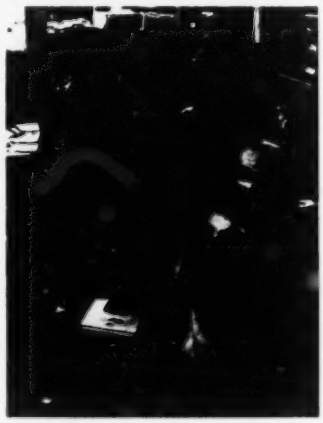
Alignment of Curriculum and Instruction

If leadership and high expectations make up the backbone of excellence in Frenship ISD, the teachers are the heart. Visiting each of the schools was a lesson in enthusiasm, dedication, and caring. We saw colorful artwork in halls and classrooms; clean, pleasant environments; involved students; and, not once did we hear a teacher's voice raised or an unkind word said. While this last observation should not be something so exceptional that we noticed it, we have heard far too much yelling and far too many disparaging remarks in other schools we have visited.

The curriculum and programs in the schools are aligned district wide both horizontally and vertically to offer seamless transitions. The junior high school teachers gave us an example of vertical and horizontal planning: seventh-grade teachers meet with both sixth- and eighth-grade teachers, as well as with other seventh-grade teachers. While the curriculum is based on state standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills), it has been revised to meet the higher expectations set by the district. Before choosing the various programs currently in use in the district, teachers and administrators sought out places that had student populations similar to Frenship's to see what worked for them and to find out why a program was successful. The teachers then sold the programs to their peers at their schools. The results have been remarkable. Not only have disadvantaged students improved academically, but students are also working at levels approximately a year ahead of most of the students who transfer in from other districts.

Frenship
CHARACTER COUNTS!℠
September 25, 2000 CONFERENCE

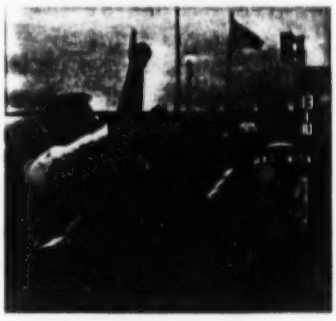
Character and Discipline Programs. We suspect that the *Character Counts*! program being used throughout the district may have as much effect on the teachers' attitudes and behavior as it has on the students'. When teachers are confident in their discipline and have established positive ways of handling classroom problems, they do not reach the frustration level that prompts loud reprimands and negative comments. *Character Counts*! is a character



development program coupled with a discipline program. It was initiated about five years ago at the elementary level and two years ago at the high school. The district began the program to help students improve academically by improving their social behavior. At North Ridge Elementary the year before the school implemented *Character Counts*!, for example, there were 425 discipline referrals to the Assistant Principal. During the first year of the program, discipline referrals fell to 220. The improvement in discipline has allowed teachers to move from giving kids information to helping kids access and process information. Teachers have become facilitators of learning.

Character Counts! is a product of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a nonsectarian, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization designed to foster ethical civic and business practices. According to the organization, the values taught transcend divisions of race, creed, politics, gender, and wealth. *Character Counts*! is designed to help young people develop the basics of good character and ethical values; it develops students socially and emotionally.

The *Character Counts*! curriculum espouses six pillars of character: respect, responsibility, caring, trustworthiness, fairness, and citizenship. Each school we visited conspicuously displayed the pillars and posters promoting the program. The principles of character are woven into daily instruction. In social skills classes at the elementary level, students explore what it takes to become people of character. At the intermediate school, the schedule provides an advisory period that includes *Character Counts*! and enrichment activities. *Victory With Honor* is a component of *Character Counts*. This program teaches coaches and other directors of extracurricular activities the importance of character in sports on and off of the field. Frenship ISD is conducting the first *Victory With Honor* Conference in the state of Texas in June 2001 in collaboration with Texas Tech University.



The discipline program relates to the six pillars by using discipline cards on which violations are marked according to which of the six elements was violated. On the positive side, at the junior high school when a teacher catches a student doing something good, the student gets a positive note on the Friday Folder. The result is a tangible caring and consideration of others that has become an obvious part of the entire culture of the district from the central office to the custodial personnel. This in turn spreads to each and every family.

Curriculum. Several specific curriculum elements were mentioned by teachers and administrators as being especially beneficial to the students: *Johnny Can Spell* phonics, *Shurley Method English*, *Excel* and *Saxon* mathematics, and *Accelerated Reader*. A brief explanation of each program follows and more details can be found on the program websites listed in the resources section at the end of this report.

Johnny Can Spell. Used in the elementary schools beginning in kindergarten, the *Johnny Can Spell* approach develops phonics and spelling. Students are presented the entire phonetic code of English during the first twelve weeks of the year. Instructional strategies incorporate multisensory practice, involve daily repetition, and provide for learning styles. During this time, the focus is on isolated phonograms (sound-spelling correspondences) coupled with phonemic awareness. Students are presented the phonetic code: the recognition and formation of the 26 letters of the alphabet, the identification of the single-letter and multi-letter combinations that form the 70 common (Orton)

phonograms, and the articulation and discrimination of speech sounds. Spelling words are selected from a high-frequency word list that begins with easy words and moves to progressively more difficult words. Teachers may also include content vocabularies from literature, science, math, or social studies to customize their spelling lists. Teachers help direct student thinking so students will accurately identify syllables, phonograms, rules, and record correct spelling of the word.

Shurley Method English. According to the teachers with whom we talked, the *Shurley Method* of teaching English has been quite successful in their schools. Developed over a span of twenty-five years, the method uses repetition, fun, and student-teacher interaction to help students learn difficult English skills. According to its web site, the *Shurley Method* uses repetition to attain mastery, uses all learning styles, provides tools for writing excellence, promotes higher order thinking skills, and is effective in teaching language skills to students with different learning abilities.

Accelerated Reader. The *Accelerated Reader* program is being used in the district's schools to improve reading levels. The program was developed by a mother looking for a way to get her children to read instead of watch TV. Books are rated by reading difficulty and assigned a number so that students can select books at or slightly above their reading level. Points are awarded depending on the difficulty of the book. Students have an opportunity to select books of varying reading difficulty, either from the library or from home, and earn points for passing a short test on each book they read. A period of time during each school day is scheduled for students to read. The schools offer various rewards to students for earning a certain number of points (e.g., 100, 200, etc.). This program provides students with an opportunity to track the improvement in their reading and be rewarded for their achievement.

Excel Math. Excel Math is a spiraling mathematics curriculum for students in kindergarten through sixth grade. This program is used primarily in the early grades in Frenship schools, however. In *Excel Math*, once a mathematical concept is introduced, students are repeatedly given practice in the use of the concepts so that they retain the concepts and develop a solid foundation on which to build their mathematical skills. We were told that this program provides a good fit with *Saxon Math*, which is used in the higher elementary grades, at the intermediate level, and in the junior high school.

Saxon Mathematics. Both the *Excel Math* and the *Saxon Math* have a spiraling curriculum where concepts are taught and continued in use as newer concepts are introduced. According to *Primary Mathematics*, a teacher's resource booklet available on the Internet, Saxon's primary mathematics is a hands-on, success-oriented program that emphasizes manipulatives and mental math. The series uses a multisensory approach to teaching and is designed for heterogeneously grouped children. Concepts are presented in carefully sequenced small pieces called increments. New objectives are introduced through group activities, and all concepts are practiced in each succeeding lesson. All areas of mathematics are integrated so students can see the interrelationships.

Instruction. Teachers told us there is a conscious effort to create quality lessons. The teachers believe their job is to help kids become lifelong learners. In order to accomplish this, teachers have shifted their methodology and instruction. Instruction has become more teacher facilitated than teacher directed Teachers encourage students—"you are here to learn

and you can learn." They are willing to go the extra mile with at-risk students and try to find ways to help students become successful. Teachers strive to create an atmosphere that empowers students to take control of their own learning. Excuses are not accepted. Teachers say they must consider the needs and abilities of each child; the object is to discover how to help each student learn.

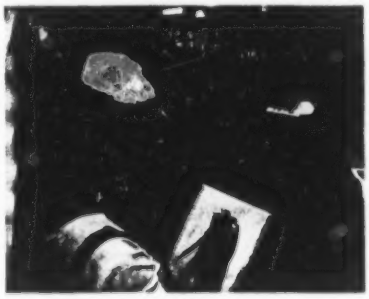
Teaming. Interdisciplinary teaming began eight years ago in the district, and teams have a common planning period from elementary through high school, except in the junior high school. At the intermediate school, about 100 students in the fifth grade form a team with three teachers. At the sixth grade, there are four teachers for a team plus electives teachers. The teachers with whom we spoke believed the team approach was more effective in teaching students. As one teacher commented, "When you have 25 kids, the quiet kid might fall through the cracks—when working in a team, the other teachers help identify the student who needs help." Teams work together to make sure students get the help they need, which helps the bottom 60% of kids. An additional benefit is that parents can meet with the whole team.

Caring. We were told that there has always been an attitude of general caring in the district, but that it has grown stronger in the past five years. We observed this caring attitude in every school. One staff member characterized working in Frenship as similar to being in a mission field; you love kids, expect the best from them, and find a way to make them succeed. Neither administrators nor teachers allow students to have an excuse for failure; they make sure students get the help and interventions they need.

Celebration of Learning. Celebrations are held to recognize the hard work of the schools. At the beginning of the year the district holds a convocation with banners for exemplary schools. Letters of commendation from the district office go to principals and teachers. And, assemblies are held in the schools throughout the year to celebrate the schools' achievements.

Integrated Technology

When it comes to technology, Frenship ISD is on the cutting edge. From school board members to kindergarten teachers, the opinion is that technology is not a fad nor is it something to consider in the future; it is alive and flourishing in the present. Technology has become a critical component in all aspects of daily business and communication. Everyone in the district understands that computer skills are an essential part of the requirements for the success of each and every student upon graduation. Technology for Frenship is not just school wide but community wide. Free Internet access is offered to every family in the district. The district also hosts a Family Technology night where for $20 families can receive instruction in using computer technology.



There is exceptional support for teachers, especially in the area of technology. Every teacher has a computer in the classroom, e-mail, and access to the Internet. Teachers are able to purchase supplies online and can communicate and network with each other online. In addition, teachers do lesson

plans, attendance, report cards, and their grade book online. Every campus has a "curriculum technologist" (C-Tech) who helps teachers develop uses for computers as a part of classroom instruction. During the summer of 2000, several teachers and C-Techs developed a large array of instructional materials. As a result, the district's website and network server currently provide hundreds of curriculum applications available for all the teachers to use.

Originally, Frenship taught technology through courses at the secondary level, but after looking at the research they integrated it into all areas of instruction across all grade levels K-12. "We use technology to teach, we don't teach technology." Incredibly, all grades use computers, including kindergarten.

A wireless laptop lab, new this year to the district, is being used with freshman teams at the high school. The laptop lab has students completely engaged in their work and has proved beneficial to instruction and student learning. Through a grant, Frenship is adding more laptop labs to their campuses. In January 2001 the district will add mobile, wireless, laptop labs to two elementary schools, the intermediate school, and two additional laptop labs at the high school. These labs illustrate the district's vision of providing the concept of "Anytime, Anywhere Learning" using technology. And, to add a new twist to the business partnership connection, Frenship students are teaching businesses to use PowerPoint.

Each of the four elementary schools has two computer labs. Teachers regularly take their classes to the labs for students to complete assignments in writing, math, social studies, and science using Word, Powerpoint, Excel, and the Internet. During our visit to one school, we observed kindergarteners sitting in small chairs around the perimeter of the room facing a 32-inch monitor that took the place of the traditional chalk board. As the teacher gave a lesson on the alphabet, the students sat spellbound as she explained and demonstrated the lesson. On her prompt, they then turned around to their own computers, logged on to the server, opened their own files on the desktop, and proceeded to type consonants and vowels onto a Word file according to instructions. A few small hands went up as the teacher and the C-Tech made their way around the room to give assistance. Needless to say, we, who learned to use computers as adults, were extremely impressed.

All of this equates to success. Dr. Whitton said that "involving technology across the curriculum becomes an equalizer, it levels the playing field." The district administrators strongly believe that their success in narrowing the achievement gap can be attributed, in part, to their accelerated computer use.

Accountability

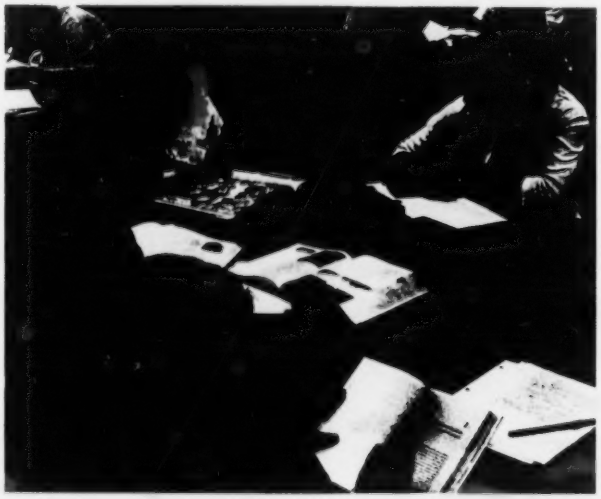
There is no question that everyone in the district feels pressure for the students to do well on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The accountability resulting from state standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills—TEKS) and the TAAS tests has fueled the district's high expectations. In Texas, school and district ratings are based.

in part, on student TAAS test scores (attendance and dropout rate are the other two criterion). Texas not only looks at a school's overall student average, however, but it also disaggregates the test data for racial/ethnic and disadvantaged groups. For the first time, special education students were included in the 2000 administration of the test. Interim Superintendent John Thomas (right) pointed out, "We will not tolerate some groups achieving poorer results than other groups. We believe that all students should be successful."

TAAS scores are public, and the district uses the data to identify areas for improvement. Frenship analyzes the scores of students down to the classroom teacher level and does item analyses of tests to see how many students answered the different choices for each question. In this way, the district can identify areas where students are not doing well and identify teachers who are not helping students meet expectations.

When the teachers themselves began to analyze the disaggregated scores, they looked at the data on questions, became aware of student needs, and identified areas in which they needed to improve student learning. TAAS tests were broken into components, and each teacher incorporated the appropriate ones into their courses. There is consensus in the district that the level of teaching has improved in the last ten years as the result of expectations generated because of accountability. A high school teacher, who has taught in the district for 28 years, said he had noticed an immediate difference in students' writing skills when the first TAAS class reached high school.

We asked a group of high school students how concerned they were about the TAAS tests. According to the students we talked to, admittedly among the better ones, "if you apply yourself in school you will know the stuff on the test—most of the stuff we had learned by eighth grade." The students did not feel the school placed a strong emphasis on TAAS. They said it does, however, make an effort to accommodate students' learning/testing preferences. High school students were given a questionnaire asking what kind of atmosphere they would feel most comfortable in when taking the three-day test. The questionnaire asked if they preferred low light vs. bright light, soft music vs. no sound. The students felt the adjusted test-taking environment was conducive to their concentration and best effort.



Coupled with the emphasis on TAAS scores, there is an emphasis on providing extra learning opportunities for students who need help. Benchmark TAAS tests are given in the fall to students throughout the district. The Benchmark tests are based on the regular TAAS tests (questions released by TEA from the previous year's test) and serve as an indicator of how well students can be expected to do on the actual tests the following spring. The regular TAAS writing test requires four types of writing (narrative, persuasive, explanatory/how-to, compare/contrast), so the district has instituted writing portfolios for every child beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the tenth grade. The student portfolios must include two examples of each type of writing by fourth grade. Although TAAS is not

administered until the third grade, the district developed tests for first- and second-graders similar to TAAS. The math test is given orally while the students do the reading test on their own.

The high school has two TAAS coordinators who conduct remedial classes for those who have not done well on the Benchmark tests. Teacher TAAS teams prepare materials and work with teachers across the curriculum. Grade-level teachers work with all students on TAAS skills, and there are special classes to help students learn basics. There is also a class every Tuesday where peer tutoring takes place. Senior and junior students who have passed the TAAS serve as tutors for younger students. In addition, the district provides a full week of tutoring in the summer.

Other measures are taken at the high school to ensure that students are learning throughout the year. Progress reports are sent out for every student every three weeks. There is also a phone bank that sends out a recorded message to parents whose children are failing. The high school issues an Agenda Planner to every student, and teachers write messages for parents in the students' planners. We were told that very few students lose the planners because they are student designed.

At the elementary schools and the intermediate school, funds will be used beginning in January 2001 to hire tutors to help students who are having problems and assist students in TAAS preparation. Classes for students needing help will have a ratio of three/four students per teacher. There is a mentoring program once a week with parent volunteers and Texas Tech University students working one-on-one with students during the school year. In the elementary schools, teachers have written their own units based on TAAS skills and developed test questions using the TAAS format. In the spring before the TAAS is administered, an after-school program with intensive tutoring is provided for students who need help.

Early Interventions and Alternative Schooling

Frenship ISD strongly believes that providing early intervention is a key ingredient in narrowing the achievement gap. The district, like all Texas schools, is obligated to administer the TAAS standardized testing for grades three through ten. As mentioned previously, Frenship has developed a developmentally appropriate test for first- and second-grade students. Through the math and reading tests, they can begin to identify students who need early intervention.

Terrific Opportunities for Perfecting Skills (TOPS) labs exist on an as needed basis in all four elementary schools to help students who get behind that day. TOPS labs have a smaller class size of three or four students per teaching session staffed by a certified teacher. Several schools have split-funded their special education teachers so that all students who need help can get it. The Frenship Director of Elementary Education spent time talking to principals and teachers to determine what was needed most for interventions and the consensus was tutors. One elementary school has a tutorial at the beginning of the day; another elementary school has an after-school tutorial.

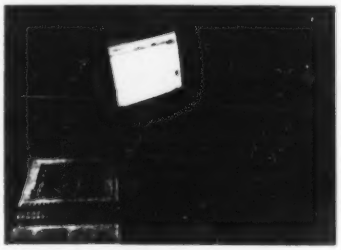
North Ridge Elementary identifies students that need help and places them in a pull-out program, Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI). North Ridge also runs an after-school program for intensive tutoring for referred students in the spring before TAAS. Summer school for K-4 students is

provided throughout the district and principals reported that retention in grade has gone down with the implementation of all these new tutorial programs.

The intermediate school (grades five and six) also uses after-school tutorials for which transportation is provided. Summer school is also an intervention at this level, but Frenship has discontinued it at the junior high school because the data did not show clear evidence of effectiveness. An additional intervention in intermediate school is the use of heterogeneously mixed teams of students. The senior

high school uses after-school tutorials, home schooling, and a transition program for all high school freshmen (who are housed in the Freshman Center wing at the high school).

The district also has an alternative school for youth that focuses on two areas: discipline issues and academic completion. The Reese Center is the location for both the discipline and academic completion programs. At the initial intake of a student for the academic completion program, the principal meets with both the students and their parents, and the orientation focuses on the student's goals and requirements for graduation. Options are available to each student: a GED, a state high school diploma (22 credits), and a diploma from Frenship High School (26 credits) which permits the students to participate in the regular high school graduation ceremony.



Reese operates two shifts: 8:00 AM-11:30 AM and 12:00 PM-3:30 PM. Most students are working, so the shifts give them some flexibility. Plato software, a self-paced application appears to be working well for students who have fallen behind in the accumulation of credit hours and who need to accelerate their accrual. The Center also provides day care for the infants and young children of the students. Class size is limited to one teacher to 12-15 students the classroom. Students at the Reese Center have a leadership council that gives them a say in campus affairs.

The students we interviewed noted that the alternative school had no cliques, "everyone feels like they belong." The students recognized they don't learn the way others do and that they needed special methods of instruction. We were fortunate to talk to a young marine just out of boot camp who had came back that day to thank the teachers at the Reese Center for all the help they had given him. Immaculate in his impressive dress uniform, he told us he had not been doing well in the regular high school and without the special interest of the teachers at the Reese Center he could not have realized his dream of joining the Marine Corps.

The second program at the Reese Campus, which began in 1995, is the discipline program for all grades. Students from grades one through four attend the Opportunity School, fifth- through eighth-grade students participate in the Step Two Program, and students in grades nine through twelve are part of Operation FORD. All three levels are character programs that teach core values through techniques like verbal judo, physical training, and mutual respect. Students have opportunities for leadership positions and career training. The purpose of the program is to transfer the power for discipline from the instructor to the student. According to the Director, "you always have the power to make a student do what you want; the purpose of these pro-

grams is to transfer that power to the students so they will manage their own behavior." He continued, "if you can change the perceptions of students, you can change their attitudes and behavior."

Students are referred into the program after several attempts in the regular classroom structure to change negative behavior patterns. The program is a change agent for behavior. Students are assessed before being released and are not released until staff members are convinced they have learned new ways to behave. Instructors lead by example and never use demeaning discipline procedures. Students wear uniforms and are addressed by their last names or as sir or mam. Each week, principals from the students' schools bring the students their assignments in order to maintain contact with the students. The physical aspect of the program is designed to be a stress reliever, improve physical fitness, and is used as a disciplinary sanction.

Once students are released from the Reese Center, there is a follow-up period. Reese Center staff members check on students at their regular schools for an amount of time based on the number of days the student was at Reese (e.g., 30 days in the program, 30 days follow-up in regular school). Students report back to the Center on Thursdays and spend one day per week on campus during the follow up period.

Conclusion

This special report is the fifth, and final, in a series of reports from the National Dropout Prevention Center on standards, assessment, accountability, and interventions. It is an appropriate finale to the research-based reports that preceded it. While this report is not research driven, it describes the findings of a week-long visit to a school district that demonstrates in practice what the accountability movement has hoped all districts would accomplish. Frenship Independent School District is a district that could have made excuses and maintained the status-quo, but didn't. Instead, it found out what was best for kids and just did it.

Frenship administrators and teachers understand that in order to help students thrive and learn they have to make decisions based on what is best for the students; they understand that what they do for one they must do for all, but that what works for one may not work for all. They understand that finding out what curriculum and instructional strategies help students learn is critical to high student achievement, that some students need more time and help in order to master some material, and that technology is a tool for learning. They understand that effective leadership is a process of setting expectations, providing support, and holding staff accountable; and that including teachers, parents, and community members in decisionmaking is the most effective path to improvement. But most importantly, they understand that change and improvement is an ongoing process, not something to fear. This district does what's best for kids!

Resources

Frenship ISD: www.frenship.k12.tx.us
Contact: Dr. John R. Thomas
Interim Superintendent
Frenship Independent School District
P.O. Box 100
Wolfforth, Texas 79382
806/866-9541

Accelerated Reader: www.advlearn.com/ar
Character Counts!: www.charactercounts.org
Excel Math: www.excelmath.com
Johnny Can Spell: http://www.nine-enterprises.com/home.htm
Michael Eaton Associates: 1-800-322-0459
Saxon Publishers: www.saxonpub.com
The Shurley Method: www.shurley.com
Texas Education Agency: www.tea.state.tx.us
Verbal Judo: www.verbaljudo.com

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Call for proposals and registration information on website

www.dropoutprevention.org

Middle School Standards, Assessment, Accountability, and Interventions

This study of middle school standards, assessment, accountability, and interventions was funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

Goal of the Study

The goal of this study has been to analyze the implementation of state and district mandated academic standards, assessment processes, accountability, and intervention strategies at the middle-school level in order to identify and describe those intervention strategies that are effective in increasing the ability of middle school students in at-risk situations to achieve state or district academic standards.

About the Authors

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The National Dropout Prevention Center and Network

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC)—a research center within the College of Health, Education, and Human Development at Clemson University, Clemson, SC—was created to significantly reduce America's dropout rate. It is committed to meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations by shaping school environments which ensure that all youth receive the quality education to which they are entitled. The NDPC acts in concert with the National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN)—a membership organization of more than 2,000 teachers, school administrators, state department of education staff, community organizations, and business leaders who are concerned with education issues. It publishes the refereed *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, a quarterly newsletter, the research-based *Solutions and Strategies* series, and other publications. It maintains a web page (dropoutprevention.org) and an e-mail listserver (ndpc@clemson.edu) that provide users with needed information and referrals quickly and easily through the Internet. The Center/Network partnership also provides professional development through its annual National Dropout Prevention Conference, annual America's At-Risk Youth National FORUM, and special regional conferences.

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